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ABSTRACT

This story is to be used as part of the social studies unit, The Aleuts of the Eighteenth Century, to show the Russian perspective on their first interaction with the Aleuts. A Russian trapper tells of his experiences on one of the first Russian ships to explore the Aleutian Islands in the 18th century. Written as a diary, the story describes first impressions of the islands and an exploratory trip ashore to look for fresh water and furbearing animals. People are sighted on the second day and gifts are exchanged when the Russian landing party arrives on shore. When one Aleut tries to grab a musket, a struggle follows in which he is wounded and the Russians quickly return to their ship. They sail to another island where they subdue the natives and spend a successful winter trapping. Many pictures illustrate the events. A glossary provides definitions of words which may be unfamiliar to intermediate or junior-high students. (AV)

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STRANGERS

The Russian Side

Book Ib of

The Aleuts of the Eighteenth Century
Social Studies Unit

Written By
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STRANGERS

I.

The narrator of the following story has been making a living for the past 10 years by trapping in Siberia, but he's been restless lately and ready to move on to an area where there are fewer trappers and where a man can be alone if he wants.

Several months ago he heard reports of a new group of islands to the east, close to the American continent across the North-East Ocean from the Kamchatka Peninsula. This new land is said to be rich in fur-bearing animals, a gold mine to a fur trapper such as himself. This is a good time for making money on furs; the Imperial Court in St. Petersburg is very extravagant in its demands for ermine, beaver, and fox. Trade with China is also good, and furs can be traded for tea, silks, and spices, which can be sold in turn in the city markets in Russia for high prices.

So he signed up as a hand on a ship sailing for America, and is now on board. The voyage so far has been short but dangerous: the boat, built hastily in the little pioneer town of Okhotsk, is held together by leather thongs rather than nails (it is too expensive to bring iron from the mines in the Urals). The weather has been good throughout the voyage, but the crew has been told that it can change very quickly in the North-East Ocean. Besides, the territory is completely unknown, and the route to the American islands they are bound for is not certain.

The narrator and his fellow trappers are prepared to deal with one other obstacle besides the weather once they reach the islands: the local inhabitants. They've dealt with the Natives of Siberia before, and figure these Natives will be like the ones back home. They will probably be useful to the Russians, for they will know what to hunt, how to hunt, and where to hunt. Even if the Americans aren't willing to help at first the Russians have their muskets to persuade them.

The narrator's first few days in the American Islands did not quite go as planned, however. Here is his story of what happened:

24ов Сентября 1745г. -- September 24, 1745

II.

We'd only been sailing for six days when we passed the first of the American islands. We were looking for a good place to anchor, a place that we could use as the winter base for our furring operations. The commander decided to go past the first island and look for a more likely place to anchor.

We've been expecting to see Americans, as Commander Bering did four years ago, but so far we have seen no sign of human life.

III.

We soon saw a second island off in the distance. The mate looked through the glass and beckoned the commander over to look for himself. The two talked for a while and then the commander gave the order to steer for the island. He planned to anchor there and send the longboat ashore to explore the area for signs of furbearing animals. If the hunting looked good, we would stay for the winter.

IV.

The island rose sharply from the sea to form a flat plateau several hundred feet high. The ground was covered with lush, long grass and bushes, already turned the color of rust by the advancing autumn. There were no trees visible from the ship. Large rocks stuck out of the sea close to shore. A light drizzle began as we got closer to the island, and fog started to close in on us. We took soundings regularly, looking for hidden shoals and more rocky outcroppings. We had heard stories from the survivors of Bering's ship about the hidden rocks, the currents, and the strong winds which are eager to damage any boat whose crew ignores them.

As we approached the small sheltered cove where we hoped to anchor, we all looked closely at the American shore. For most of the crew, this was the first close view of the New World. Birds dived and screamed at our ship, perhaps afraid that we would steal a few of the hundreds of eggs in the rocky nests. Sea otters, the animals that would make us rich, dived under water as we approached, and surfaced again ahead of us in the kelp beds off shore. Still we saw no sign of human life.

V.

The ship anchored and the commander ordered the longboat lowered. He chose five of the crew to row into shore. Those of us who were chosen climbed down to the longboat and headed for the coast.

Halfway to shore we found ourselves stuck in a large kelp bed so thick that one person had to reach out in front of the boat and cut the kelp away to allow the boat through. Birds continued to play around us, but the sea otters were cautious. They must be used to hunters, we decided.

Once ashore, our orders were to search for fresh water and signs of foxes or other furbearing animals that would bring a good price in the markets of China and among the Imperial Court in St. Petersburg.

VI.

Our scouting party was not successful in finding signs of animals, for we stayed on the island for only a short time. We were there long enough to learn that we would be able to fill up our water casks from a fresh water stream that emptied into the cove. The bones of spawned-out salmon still lined the shallow pools at the stream's edge.

We also stayed ashore long enough to see our first evidence of people. We found a broken bone point, perhaps a fish hook, by the stream. Lying near it was a finely woven grass bag, apparently dropped by one of the Americans. I looked inside the bag and found there several beach pebbles with grooves worn around their middles, more bone points, and a piece of the smooth and shiny black rock which comes from volcanoes when the hot lava cools quickly. We would take these objects back to the ship to show the commander.

We now knew that Americans must be closeby, and we thought it best to return to the ship and report to our commander right away. We had heard stories from Chirikov's first encounter with Americans, when his men did not return from just such a scouting party as our own. No one ever knew what became of the men. Remembering that story, we did not want to meet the Americans until we were safely on board ship behind our muskets.

VII.

Once we were back at the ship, we showed the commander the artifacts we had found. He ordered all hands to stay on board until the Americans approached us and we were able to determine how warlike they were. He also reassured us that these Americans, like the natives of Siberia, would not have fire-arms. He felt sure that if we did have to fight them, we would have no trouble in winning the skirmish.

We lay at anchor in the cove all night long. We saw no signs of the Americans. We men were becoming restless. We were nervous, and ready for something --anything-- to happen. We are men of action, not used to waiting around for someone else to make the first move.

VIII.

25ое Сентября 1745г. -- September 25

Then at dawn we saw them. Over a hundred Americans appeared on shore. They carried short spears and knives. They wore seal gut or birdskin coats and their faces were painted red and blue. They shouted, sang, and waved for us to come ashore.

The commander ordered us all to stay where we were. If the Americans wanted to talk to us, they could come to our ship.

Several hours later, the Americans were still on shore. The commander finally ordered the longboat lowered into the water, and he and four others rowed toward shore. They stopped just inside the reefs, and, though we couldn't hear them from the boat, they seemed to speak with the Americans. We later learned that the Americans did not speak the same language as the Siberians, so our Koryak interpreter was no help.

The commander threw a package of metal needles ashore, and one of the Americans caught it. They seemed to understand that this was meant as a peace offering. They threw back some cormorant skins.

I, for one, was relieved -- the first meeting had been peaceful with gifts from both sides. There would be no fighting after all, and I thought the Natives would willingly take us to the good hunting grounds. The next day I would be proven wrong.

IX.

26ое Сентября 1745г. -- September 26

Again we lay at anchor all night. As morning dawned, we could see the Americans on shore once again. This time the commander ordered the longboat to be lowered right away. Again four went with him to the shore, and this time I was one who was chosen to go. We carried our empty water casks, as well as some gifts and the muskets. Only later did I realize how nervous I was as I rowed the boat to shore and stepped onto the pebbled beach. I held my musket tightly and clenched my teeth until my jaw ached.

Once we were all on shore, the exchange of gifts began. The commander presented the man who appeared to be chief with tobacco and Chinese pipes, and showed how they were used. In return, he was given a stick with a seal head carved on the top. Then the Americans pointed to the muskets. They seemed to want us to give them one. I gripped mine even more tightly; I had no intention of arming one of the Natives. They must have thought us very simple indeed! The Americans became angry as they realized that we would not give them our guns. One of them grabbed my musket and I

tried to jerk it away from him. He wouldn't let go. I tugged harder but he held on even more tightly. I shouted at him and we scuffled. Suddenly the commander yelled "Fire!" and I shot. An American screamed. The rest froze. The screaming man lifted his hand and stared at it in amazement and shock. Blood gushed from the hand. It had been hit by the musket shot.

In the confusion that followed, we rushed to the longboat, jumped into it, and rowed quickly back to the ship. As we were helped up onto the deck, we saw Americans paddling swiftly toward us in their skin boats. A dozen slim short spears were thrown at our ship but they all clattered harmlessly against the hull and slid into the water. We quickly weighed anchor and were soon sailing out of the cove in a north-northwesterly direction back to the first island we had seen two days before.

X.

We quickly subdued the Americans on that island and began the business of trapping. We spent the entire winter there, and caught a large number of foxes and sea otters; the best crop I've had in ten years of trapping. We sailed for Russia yesterday. When we land, I'll be a rich man. I, for one, plan to return to the American islands again next year.

GLOSSARY

artifacts: any object made by human work

cautious: careful to avoid danger

evidence: something that tends to prove

extravagant: spending too much

Imperial Court: the family, advisors, and attendants of the czarina of Russia

intention: anything intended or planned

interpreter: a person whose work is in translating a foreign language orally

narrator: a person who tells a story

obstacle: anything that gets in the way

persuade: to cause to do something, especially by reasoning or urging

skirmish: a brief fight between small groups

subdue: to conquer; to overcome

survivor: one who continues to live after or in spite of a wreck

territory: the land and waters belonging to or used by a certain group of people